

31 March 1970

MEMORANDUM FOR THE DIRECTOR

SUBJECT: The Bombing Decisions --  
31 March and 1 November 1968

1. Much ink has already been shed, and more is sure to follow, on the background considerations that lay behind President Johnson's decision to curtail the bombing of North Vietnam, enunciated in his 31 March 1968 TV address, and his decision to halt the bombing altogether on 1 November 1968. Most of what has appeared to date has been mythology laced with special pleading, or vice versa, couched as political theater -- a psychodrama in which the forces of good contended with the forces of evil in a struggle for the "President's mind." This approach is palpably rooted in misinformation or distorted nonsense since it implicitly portrays President Johnson as a malleable passive patsy. Whatever else he may have been, that he most assuredly was not.

2. There was of course a lot of background behind Mr. Johnson's 31 March and 1 November decisions -- both of which were very much his decisions and not anyone else's. There was also a lot of pulling and hauling (and leaking) within the upper echelons of government, much of it of considerably greater importance to the pullers and haulers than to the President himself. The Agency played some hand in some of this background evolution. This memorandum attempts to refresh your memory by summarizing our more important contributory efforts.

3. The Bombing Studies. Our least dramatic but probably most important contribution was the series of bombing studies going back to the fall of 1965, especially "McNamara II" ("The Will to Persist" memorandum) of 26 August 1966. These studies, and the special "Tuesday Lunch" series done during the fall of 1968, are summarized in the 19 March 1970 memorandum we sent to Dr. Kissinger. The Agency's

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analysis of relevant data was a model of professional thoroughness, but our conclusions were consistent and fairly simple: because of the nature of North Vietnam's economy and the kind of war Hanoi was fighting, bombing (no matter how unrestricted) could not render North Vietnam physically incapable of carrying on the struggle. Bombing could, and did, inhibit the flow of men and materiel to the South and make their dispatch more costly, but bombing could not physically prevent Hanoi from meeting the external support requirements of its southern forces. Thus, in the final analysis, the bombing program had to be weighed in light of its political rather than its physical or military impact.

4. The October 1967 "Alternatives" Study. In (to the best of my recollection) late September 1967, at Secretary McNamara's request and with your approval, Messrs. Warnke, Halperin, Lehman and myself were convened as a quiet quartet to canvass possible alternative strategies in Vietnam. (Warnke was then Assistant Secretary/ISA and Mort Halperin was his Deputy Assistant Secretary for Policy Planning.) We met several times during October 1967, (I particularly remember holding our 14 October meeting in my office because of the march on the Pentagon that was then taking place). The idea was that we would produce a joint paper, but the final effort -- entitled "An Alternative Fifteen Month Program for Vietnam" -- was much more Warnke and Halperin's paper than it was Lehman's and mine. Dick and I thought the paper, once published and sent to McNamara, quietly died. On rereading it with the perspective of hindsight, however, its ultimate function becomes clearer. The paper basically argued for a curtailment, if not suspension, of the bombing plus the opening of negotiations. It contains in well developed outline almost all the arguments Warnke -- and Halperin -- successfully urged on Clifford during March 1968.

5. To digress for a moment, I am convinced that Halperin played a pivotal role in shaping Warnke's (and, through Warnke, Clifford's) views. I am also convinced Halperin was a principal source of many (or most) of the political/policy inspired leaks to the New York Times, including the 206,000 Westmoreland request figure.

6. The November 1967 "Wise Men" Briefing. In the late fall of 1967 -- I think the end of November but it may have been early December -- President Johnson convened his council of "wise men" for briefings and discussions on Vietnam. The fall 1967 group included, to the best of my recollection Rusk, Katzenbach, McNamara, Vance, Rostow, Bill Bundy (and yourself) from the administration, plus Dean Acheson, George Ball, McGeorge Bundy, Clark Clifford, Douglas Dillon, Arthur Dean, ~~Fohn~~ McGley, General Bradley, General Ridgway, General Maxwell Taylor and Robert Murphy

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Justice Fortas. I think Harriman was and Goldberg was not present at that meeting (but am not positive). Lodge may have been present, but I am not sure, nor am I positive about Paul Nitze.

7. At the fall 1967 clan gathering, pre-dinner briefings were given (in State's Operations Center Conference Room) by either Habib or Bundy (I am not sure which) on the political situation, General Wheeler on the military situation, and myself on enemy capabilities and intentions. In the fall of 1967 things were looking up and the briefings reflected this. I do not have my notes and did not write a text, but do recall pointing out the fragility of the political situation in Saigon, surface tenuousness of recent pacification gains, the Communists' continuing determination and their obvious need to do something to reverse then current trends. After the briefing, which seemed well received, the clan went upstairs to a dinner which you attended but I did not.

8. The Acheson Conversations. Per your instructions, on the morning of 27 February I went around to participate in the first of two sessions at Dean Acheson's home. The second session was held on 12 March. Present at both were Acheson, Philip Habib, (then) Major General William DePuy, Richard Steadman (Warnke's ISA Deputy for the Far East) and William Jordan (Rostow's Assistant). At Acheson's request, both sessions were devoted to a frank, full discussion inventorying post Tet 68 positions, problems and prospects. Per our instructions, nothing was held back and the arguments got pretty brisk. The participants reflected almost the entire spectrum of informed official opinion, from the very dovish Steadman to the JCS-minded (but fairly so) DePuy. No firm conclusions were reached or recommendations offered, but Acheson thanked us all and said we had given him just what he wanted.

9. Dealings With Clifford. Throughout 1967 (and 1966) I had come to know Clifford quite well through his activities as Chairman of the PFIAB, which I briefed on Vietnam developments at each of its meetings. After his appointment as Secretary of Defense was announced, at his request (and with your approval) I went to his office on at least two occasions to discuss Vietnam with him in detail. We spent two hours together the night before his Senate confirmation hearings propping him for troublesome Vietnam questions that might arise. At his explicit request, my Monday sessions with the Secretary of Defense that McNamara had initiated in the fall of 1966 continued without a break after Clifford assumed that office.

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10. The March 1968 Task Force. In late February 1968, by direction of President Johnson, a Task Force was convened under Clifford's chairmanship to review the Vietnam bidding in light of Tet offensive developments, Wheeler's visit to Westmoreland, and the Westmoreland "request" for 206,000 troops. The course of events here gets more than a little complicated. In early February Westmoreland came in (apparently per request) with a tentative list of immediate needs and future requirements. This cable was discussed at an 11 February White House meeting attended by Rusk, McNamara, Taylor, Clifford, Rostow, Wheeler and yourself. (The President presumably chaired this, but the Wheeler cable to Westmoreland on it does not specifically say President Johnson was present.) The 11 February meeting produced further cables, the Wheeler trip and, ultimately, the Clifford Task Force.

11. The Task Force met in plenary session on Saturday, 2 March, and Sunday, 3 March. At your request, I came in at lunch time on 2 March, remained the rest of the day and attended (with you) all day on Sunday, 3 March. There may have been a preliminary 1 March organizational session but my notes don't reflect it. After 3 March, to my knowledge there were no more plenary sessions with all members attending.

12. Clifford was in the Chair at all sessions. The 2 and 3 March sessions were attended by Fowler (definitely 2 March, I think also 3 March but notes do not say), Rusk, Bundy, Habib (also Katzenbach briefly), Nitze, Warnke, Halperin (in and out), Goulding, Wheeler, Maxwell Taylor, Rostow, Helms (and myself). You submitted three Agency papers, all included in the notebook Bundy put together for the guidance of all Committee members:

a. On 2 March you handed out a 26 February 1968 ONE paper entitled "The Outlook in Vietnam" and a 29 February collective effort entitled "Communist Alternatives in Vietnam."

b. At the 3 March meeting, you handed out around the table a 1 March paper entitled "Questions Concerning the Situation in Vietnam." The questions were posed by Bundy as part of the staff work on this Task Force exercise. This paper's only distribution was the copies you passed out at the 3 March meeting, but portions of it were subsequently leaked to the New York Times (probably by Halperin).

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13. The two days of plenary discussion (2 and 3) March covered every aspect of the Vietnam situation, its impact on the United States, and the probable consequences on both sides of the Pacific of the whole spectrum of possible U.S. Government actions. The Agency's input was scrupulously confined to intelligence judgments (on the situation, the politico-military balance of forces, probable Communist reactions to various possible U.S. actions, etc.). This input was made via the papers outlined above, your remarks at the table and one or two comments from me.

14. The upshot of the two-day session was that a final paper was to be prepared for the President after some additional homework had been done by some of the participants. My notes unambiguously indicate, however, that Clifford pulled together the sense of the Sunday (3 March) meeting by saying the paper to the President would recommend:

- (1) Granting the first request (i.e., Westmoreland's immediate needs.)
- (2) Getting (the U.S. Government) in position to meet further requests if Washington made the later policy decision to do so.
- (3) Any emergency (MACV) needs would be met as soon as possible.
- (4) There should be a study in depth of new strategic guidance.
- (5) We should utilize withholding (reinforcements) as a means of leverage to ascertain what we can get out of the GVN and ARVN.

15. Rusk noted at the close of the 3 March meeting that the President would want to look at the general policy (implications of the Task Force paper) and would "want it reviewed in great detail."

16. I never saw the final paper that went forward to President Johnson but recall your telling me that it substantially followed the line Clifford outlined. The Task Force's deliberations did not focus on the issue of curtailing the bombing and so far as I am aware, this matter was not even specifically mentioned in the summary written report submitted to the President.

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17. Second "Wise Men" Briefing. On Monday, 25 March the "wise men" reconvened at the State Department prior to a scheduled 26 March session with the President. This time the briefings came after dinner and the cast of characters was slightly different. Clifford was present as Secretary of Defense (McNamara, to the best of my recollection, was not present). Goldberg, Lodge and Vance were all there, I am not sure about Harriman and Nitze.

18. DePuy, I and Habib gave oral briefings (in that order) on the military situation, the enemy's capabilities and intentions, and the political situation. The briefings were candid and forthright but not, to my recollection, excessively gloomy. The Vietnam picture at that time was a mixture of plusses and minuses which we all attempted to outline objectively and fairly. I did not have (or make) a text, but a copy of the rather detailed notes from which I talked are appended to this memo to refresh your memory. There was some brisk questioning after I spoke but the audience seemed appreciative. I said nothing radically out of line with Agency reporting and interpretative analysis or out of line with what I had been saying to both Clifford and Rostow. Walt chatted with me as the meeting broke up and though he took issue with me on some points of detail, he was quite complimentary. I certainly do not recall his voicing any surprise or shock.

19. Session With President Johnson. On Wednesday, 27 March, you called me and told me to present myself at the Cabinet Room at 1600 prepared to give the same briefing I had given the "wise men" the preceeding Monday night. Walking down the White House hall you tipped me off that the President had been surprised at the positions taken by the "wise men" on 26 March and wanted to hear for himself the briefings they had been given. Phil Habib was out of town, but Bill DePuy and I gave the President a rerun of our Monday evening remarks.

20. To the best of my recollection, ranged around the Cabinet table were yourself, Walt Rostow, Vice President Humphrey, President Johnson, General Abrams and General Wheeler. There were also a few strays in the room (including an Air Force enlisted man in fatigues who wandered in, was told to sit down and proved to be Pat Nugent). After Bill DePuy finished his recap of the military briefing, I took the Secretary of Defense's chair directly across the Cabinet table from the President, pulled out the notes I had used Monday night, and launched forth.

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21. Amidst various phone calls received and placed on miscellaneous matters (mostly domestic), President Johnson -- a very impressive figure at that range and under those circumstances -- listened intently, often interrupting with questions. As time wore on, he began asking if that was all or if I had finished. Gulping mentally, I kept replying no, there were some additional points and considerations he ought to hear. With a grin, he then would bid me to continue, which I did until the full presentation was complete. If President Johnson was upset or distressed, he certainly did not show it. In fact he started to walk out of the room then turned to walk its full length to where I was standing, pumped my hand, thanked me warmly for my presentation, and made some very flattering and gracious remarks about my overall work and contribution to the national effort. As you may recall, the Vice President walked out of the White House with us and the three of us chatted for a bit outside the door. Mr. Humphrey was effusive about the briefing and said he could tell that the President had liked it very much.

22. Session With McPherson. Shortly after the session with President Johnson (I think on the afternoon of Friday, 29 March), Harry McPherson came to my office and spent almost two hours reviewing the bidding on the whole Vietnam situation. He was given substantially the same pitch I had given the "wise men" and the President.

23. The November 1968 Halt. The above paragraphs cover the major Agency actions possibly germane to the considerations and deliberations leading to President Johnson's 31 March speech. Our actions or input to the 1 November halt were much more limited, primarily because of the "freeze" the President instituted on 11 October. Our involvement in October was thus limited to whatever comments or intelligence judgments you may have personally offered at "Tuesday lunches" plus the documents inventoried in our 19 March 1970 memorandum to Kissinger.

*George A. Carver, Jr.*  
George A. Carver, Jr.

Special Assistant for Vietnamese Affairs

Attachments

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